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Security Council

Seventy-second year

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8076th meeting
Thursday, 26 October 2017, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Delattre	(France)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Inchauste Jordán
	China	Mr. Wu Haitao
	Egypt	Mr. Aboulatta
	Ethiopia	Ms. Guadey
	Italy	Mr. Cardi
	Japan	Mr. Bessho
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Sadykov
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	Senegal	Mr. Seck
	Sweden	Mr. Skoog
	Ukraine	Mr. Fesko
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Rycroft
	United States of America	Ms. Sison
	Uruguay	Mr. Rosselli

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President (*spoke in French*): In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Staffan de Mistura, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, to participate in this meeting.

Mr. De Mistura is joining us via video-teleconference from Geneva.

I now give the floor to Mr. De Mistura.

Mr. De Mistura: Let me update the Security Council on developments and lay out some of the plans that we have for the next round of the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva. I shall then brief the Council on some of the other potential initiatives.

We are seeing very significant developments in the fight against United Nations-proscribed terrorists in Syria. Raqqa has been liberated by the United States-led coalition and Mayadin by the Syrian Government and its allies. Action continues to eliminate the remaining Da'esh pockets in Deir ez-Zor. By and large, the deconfliction among the parties fighting Da'esh is working so far, but we also see Da'esh retreating into the desert and launching brutal assymetric attacks in and near Damascus. Without an inclusive political process, there is a real threat that Da'esh or similar entities could return and exploit the feelings of marginalization and grievance. That is why we need a political process.

On another note, it is also clear that some recent public ceremonies in Raqqa did not send the right signal — indeed, they sent the wrong signal — about inclusion.

Meanwhile, apart from the south-west, where via the Amman arrangements the overall level of violence remains reduced, despite some flashpoints in Bayt Jinn, we are receiving numerous reports of heavy shelling and even air strikes in Idlib and Hama. This might be attributed to the actions of Tahrir al-Sham/Al-Nusra, but in other areas — eastern Ghouta, southern Damascus and the Rastan triangle — there has been a trend of re-escalation rather than de-escalation, whichwe fear might intensify if energies are directed away from fighting Da'esh to somewhere else.

Let me also register my concern that we are not seeing any increased humanitarian access in the de-escalation areas and elsewhere, as we had wished. But I will leave it to my colleague Mark Lowcock to refer to that in due time. As the Council is aware, we have seen some shocking images, which we cannot independently verify, allegedly emerging in the past few days from eastern Ghouta. Again, I will leave that for Mr. Lowcock to elaborate on.

The desired improvements in humanitarian access therefore continue to elude us, owing to many factors: the ongoing fighting in some areas, bureaucratic impediments and interference by parties to the conflict. Those with influence must work to enable the United Nations and its partners to deliver assistance by whatever modalities are available — cross-line, cross-border or regular programmes.

With a genuine sense of civic duty and commitment to support their own fellow Syrians, we are constantly hearing messages coming from civil-society organizations, which are continuing to express alarm at the impact of the conflict on the protection of civilians who are still being affected, including the killing of civilians and a lack of humanitarian access. We all share that concern, which is the reason I share it. Again, I will leave it to Mr. Lowcock.

It is therefore a very mixed picture. Terrorism is on the defensive, but it will not be defeated by military means alone. De-escalation arrangements are sometimes being seriously challenged, but they are working. The next Astana meeting should therefore focus on putting the existing de-escalation arrangements back on track and on finalizing the establishment of a proper monitoring system. That is vital in order to see real action on the humanitarian front as well.

Let me now turn to the political process. Let us recall that, first, any de-escalation or any other arrangement must be interim in nature and should not lead to the de facto "soft" partitioning of Syria.

Secondly, the United Nations remains committed to the sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity of Syria, as do all Council members. Our goal is the realization of a truly nationwide ceasefire and a political process to advance the implementation of the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and resolution 2254 (2015).

Thirdly, the Security Council has clearly mandated the United Nations — through me as the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General and of the Council — to convene and advance the intra-Syrian political negotiation process for a political solution to the conflict, and no one else. I have therefore been carefully preparing a new round of talks. I was in Moscow last week to see Russian Federation Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Defence Minister Shoygu, as well as in Brussels to see the European Union High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, and discuss with her possibilities for how the Brussels conference in the spring could support the political process — which I hope will be well established by that time. Also, yesterday in Washington, D.C., I met with the United States National Security Advisor, Mr. McMaster, and I have just come to brief the Council following a meeting with United States Secretary of State Tillerson here in Geneva. That is why I must apologize to the Council for not being able to be there in person. I also consulted with the Secretary-General earlier this week while in New York and received very clear guidance. I am now engaging with a range of other contacts, including with Syrian and regional players.

Accordingly, I wish to indicate to the Council — in fact, announce — my intention to convene the eighth round of intra-Syrian talks in Geneva on 28 November. I will continue to consult everyone concerned in that regard prior to that date. We intend to hold formal plenary meetings as well as technical discussions over a period of time. The work plan for the eighth round in Geneva will be framed by resolution 2254 (2015) and the four baskets, which each need to find an expression in the framework agreement to realize a transitional political process in implementing resolution 2254 (2015). I have asked for focus and realism because we need to get the parties into real negotiations over items where there is some prospect that they could begin to narrow the gap and really negotiate.

Applying that logic, my considered assessment as the mediator is that for the eighth around — and I would like to ask the Council's support on this — we should see if we can move some aspects of the agenda concretely forward, far beyond just exploration, and enter into negotiation. Specifically, in my opinion, in the eighth round we should focus on two main points: first, the schedule and process for drafting a new constitution and, secondly, but not necessarily in that order, the precise requirements for United Nations-supervised elections as per resolution 2254 (2015). Negotiations should then be informed by the overall framework of resolution 2254 (2015), as I already said, and by the existing 12 essential principles. In that regard, I am ready to put to the parties initial thoughts as a starting point for serious negotiations.

I also believe that the time has come for a serious step on detainees, abductees and missing persons. I genuinely hope that could emerge from the next Astana meeting. Indeed, we have already made some advance suggestions on how to build on it. We need to continue to push for progress however we can, as that is probably one of the most important confidence-building measures that Syrians, thousands of them, would like to hear.

As we focus on negotiations on those two key points — United Nations-supervised elections as per resolution 2254 (2015) and the constitution — we must continue discussions in preparation for negotiations on all baskets, including 1 and 4. It is hard to see how that could in fact proceed without looking at it in the context of resolution 2254 (2015).

We will also do everything possible to ensure that we draw on the best contributions of civil society, through the civil society support room we have here in Geneva, and utilize women's contributions and a gender perspective, including via the women's advisory board, especially on the two main issues for the negotiations in the eighth round, which I just mentioned.

I need the Council's support to move ahead based on what I have said here; let me first indicate in which areas. We hope to see a successful focus meeting in Astana on 30 and 31 October. In that regard, I already flagged the challenges to the de-escalation arrangements and the importance of advancing the detainee file. We must also ensure that humanitarian mine action moves forward. We have a common interest in preventing the further unravelling of the interim de-escalation and ceasefire arrangements that have been put in place. That is what Astana was always meant to be about, and that is what we want, and hope, they will fully achieve.

Secondly, those with influence over the Government should now exercise that influence and focus on how to ensure that it comes to Geneva ready to negotiate. I particularly raised those points in details in my meetings in Moscow — quite intensely.

Thirdly, we need to see a successful second meeting in Riyadh — soon, and ideally before the next Geneva meetings. We will continue to coordinate on that. We have now heard about the fact that that initiative is actually likely to take place. We sincerely hope that the initiaive, originated by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the key meeting in Riyadh of 2015, will be followed-up when Saudi Arabia hosts the second meeting of the opposition in Riyadh. We hope that it proceeds accordingly. It would be a mistake if we think that time is on our side. The best way to proceed requires intensified engagement among the key players in support of the Geneva process. Let me say that advocates of Syrians' women's rights are calling for a minimum of 30 per cent representation in the delegations of both the Government and the opposition as negotiators. As I always do, I urge the Syrian parties and international supporters to strongly support that call.

Fourthly, let us remember the regional and international dimensions of Syria. I am doing my best as the mediator to consult a large number of groups and focus international discussions on how to concretely support the Geneva process. Frankly, I welcome any suggestions from the Council on how that can be done. In that regard, I welcome initiatives through which the international community could come together in supporting the efforts of the United Nations.

Finally, I wish to bring to the Council's attention the fact that, when I was in Moscow, the Russian Federation briefed me regarding their own initiative to convene a large gathering of Syrians in Syria at the Russian air base in Khmeimim in the near future. Perhaps we may hear more about that during our closed consultations, including from the Permanent Representative of Russia. I look forward to hearing that, as well as the views of other members of the Council. In looking at Riyadh, at Astana and at anything else, my focus is always the same. Does it help to advance the United Nations-led process in Geneva, as laid out in resolution 2254 (2015), or not? Here are some bottom lines.

First, it is time to move forward on the political track. It is really a plastic special moment. Let us use it. After Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, I used to say, as the Council probably remembers, that there would be a moment of truth. Now is the moment of truth. Next week in Astana could be crucial for the stabilization of the de-escalation areas. Secondly, those with influence over the Government should use it in order to get them ready to negotiate substance in Geneva. Thirdly, the same applies to those with influence over the opposition. The meeting of the opposition in Riyadh should take place as soon as possible and lead to a constructive and proactive outcome. Fourthly, we need active international engagement in support of the Geneva process. Fifthly, the eighth round of talks is planned for 28 November. We will try to move into real negotiations on the constitution and elections supervised by the United Nations, as laid out in resolution 2254 (2015). In parallel, we should, of course, keep exploring the issue of governance and terrorism. We should look at any initiative by virtue of whether it contributes to the United Nations-led political process in Geneva, which the Council has mandated me to pursue on behalf of the Secretary-General and the Council.

That is my summary of, if I can put it this way, a bottom line wish list.

The President (*spoke in French*) I thank Mr. De Mistura for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Security Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. Rosselli (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): We are in a typical pattern whereby we are usually just about the only ones to take the floor during open meetings. I would like to congratulate you, Sir, for holding today's open briefing. We had spent far too long in a closed format in the little room next to the Chamber, where not very much happened.

I think it proper that, as the Security Council, we always deal with facts and reality. In recent months, the reality on the ground has changed. Although there are still continued acts of violence and military operations taking place in Syria, it is notable that the situation on the ground has changed. There are zones of de-escalation. We note that terrorist groups are losing power. For example, Da'esh was expelled from Raqqa, and soon may also be expelled soon from Deir ez-Zor.

It is also clear that that has meant that the Syrian Government clearly has the upper hand on the ground over the tens of armed groups and coalitions with which it has had military confrontations since 2011. Therefore, the current reality means that we have to act on the basis of those facts. Otherwise, whatever we do will not be useful. In that regard, let me say that we remain convinced that there is no military solution to the crisis in Syria. Therefore, more than ever before, the negotiation processes are fundamental.

Once more, we would like to pay tribute to the tireless work of Mr. Staffan de Mistura and his entire team. Over and over again, they do not cease in working to take into account developments on the ground, as well as developments in the views and feelings of all actors. They always seek new areas and build on existing areas in which they can move forward the process of negotiation.

Mr. De Mistura has just told us, and we commend him, that he is taking a calculated risk in convening the eighth round of talks on 28 November. It shows great ambition. Mr. De Mistura wants to discuss substance and concentrate on two specific points: the constitutional process and the electoral process. Those are central elements laid out in resolution 2254 (2015), but perhaps the new political reality on the ground might in some way facilitate the groups coming to really incorporate the need to sit around a table and negotiate on issues of substance. In that regard, the efforts mentioned by Mr. De Mistura, including the requests made to Governments and to the opposition to take such a step, must be fully supported by the Council. I would also hope that the second round of meetings in Riyadh will be a success so that we really can see a united opposition speaking with one voice, rather than a cacophony of various groups that often express contradictory points of view.

I am very much improvising regarding notes that were well prepared, but having listened to what Mr. De Mistura has said I must take into account the new elements of the situation that he has explained to us. Let me say once again that we have full confidence in his efforts. The Security Council must meet its obligations, firmly support Mr. De Mistura and his team, and ensure that all actors in this crisis hear the Council's opinion that the only way to resolve the situation is through political negotiations.

The President (*spoke in French*): There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers.

I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.30 a.m.